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Apr 24 2008

FLOATING TURBINES: Out of sight, but not out of mind



Written by Edward F. Maroney



EDWARD F. MARONEY PHOTO

WILL IT FLOAT? – Ray Dackerman, general manager of Blue H USA LLC, left, poses with a photo of his parent company's first floating turbine, a test installation off the coast of Italy. Martin Reilly, president of Reilly Associates of Boston and Hyannis, is working on the project as well.

Blue H backers float notion of far-off ocean wind turbines

The only thing far-off about floating wind turbines is their distance from land, not their technology, according to Ray Dackerman, general manager of Blue H USA LLC.

Dackerman and Martin Reilly, president of Reilly Associates of Boston and Hyannis, spoke with Barnstable Patriot editors this week about plans to create an energy-producing wind park with 120 turbines 23 miles from Martha's Vineyard and 45 miles from New Bedford.

Parent company Blue H Technologies BV already has a test

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installation in waters off the coast of Puglia, Italy, and Dackerman said the science behind it has been tested for years on oil and gas drilling platforms.

Blue H rolled out its Massachusetts plans the same week the federal Minerals Management Service held hearings on the Cape and Islands and in Boston on Cape Wind's proposal for a 130-turbine wind park in shallow waters on Horseshoe Shoal, visible from Barnstable's south shore.

Dackerman and Reilly stressed that their project wasn't in competition with developer Jim Gordon's, adding that they seized the moment to send the message that deepwater energy recovery from wind was closer to reality than many thought.

Dackerman said his company looked carefully at coastal Massachusetts resources, both natural and human, before deciding to commit funds to a project in the United States. What tipped the scales in the commonwealth's favor were high and constant winds at their selected site, and the sheer brainpower of institutions such as UMass Amherst, described by Dackerman as a source of new concepts in wind energy.

At the ocean site, Blue H proposes to sink counterweights that would anchor each platform, and to use two-blade rather than three-blade turbines. The former make more noise, but that's not much of a problem if you're two dozen miles away from homes. Dackerman and Reilly noted also that their site is well away from ferry routes.

Cabling is a significant expense, but not an insurmountable obstacle, according to Dackerman. Not only are their lengthier cable connections already in use, he said, but the cost for Blue H will be offset by its ability to assemble entire turbine platforms on land rather than sea. Cape Wind, on the other hand, will need to hire a pile-driving ship to drive steel into the seabed, part of an overall project cost that could reach \$2 billion.

Dackerman said Blue H has already attracted interest from investors who manage portfolios for Lehman Brothers, the Royal Bank of Scotland, and other financial houses.

The interest Dackerman and Reilly are most happy about attracting is from MMS itself.

"MMS a year ago didn't know deep water existed," Dackerman said at the March press conference held to introduce the company. "Deep water is not 10 to 15 years away. MMS needs to know Blue H is here now. We're a viable alternative."

The Blue H'ers got to sit down with MMS personnel after that, and Rodney Cluck, project manager for the agency's Cape Wind review, said the meeting was productive. He said the deep-water option would not affect the MMS environmental impact statement on Cape Wind because any comparison at this stage was "apples to oranges."

Cluck noted that the Cape Wind review is for the full-scale industrial complex while Blue H is looking for a test tower, approval for which may come in a few months.

Dackerman and Reilly say the company, because it's using tested technology, will be ready to go full-scale quickly after its demonstration in American waters.

"We do not see it as a competitive project," Cape Wind spokesman Mark Rodgers said. "It's interesting technology, very futuristic. There's a long, long way to go."

For Blue H believers, however, that way is long only in miles, not years.

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